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APPLICATION FOR PATENT

TITLE: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MANAGING CUSTOMER DATA

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to systems and methods for managing data. In particular, but not by way of limitation, the present invention relates to systems and methods for categorizing, collecting and/or analyzing customer service data.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Customer service often requires quick, consistent responses to customer inquiries. In the not so distant past, live service agents responded to most customer inquiries by phone. Phone responses are extremely expensive, and with the spread of the internet, live agents began to respond to customer inquiries by cheaper methods such as email and chat programs.

[0003] Live agents, whether responding by phone, email or chat program, remain important for many businesses. Companies seeking to further reduce their costs, however, replaced or supplemented live agents with automated systems such as virtual agents and interactive voice response (IVR) systems. Automated systems respond to routine customer inquiries based on a decision tree and/or active logic. These systems are often referred to as “response systems.”

[0004] All of these different response systems generally generate some performance metrics by which they can be evaluated. For example, a phone response system can report the number of calls received, average number of minutes required to respond to

each call, number of calls abandoned before being reached, etc. Other response systems generally report similar metrics.

[0005] Different response systems are generally not integrated, and the different reporting metrics are integrated poorly, if at all. A customer with an email response system, a voice response system, and an automated agent could receive three different sets of metrics and may have no way to evaluate the combined performance of all three systems. Further, these disparate response systems do not enable a consistent response strategy for addressing user inquiries. A phone operator, for example, could generate a different response to a particular inquiry than would an automated system. Such response inconsistencies make integrating metrics from different response systems difficult.

[0006] Although present response systems are functional, they are not satisfactory. A system and method are needed to address the shortfalls of present technology and to provide other new and innovative features. For example, systems and methods are needed to better provide an overall, or holistic view, of a company's interaction with its customers. Similarly, a system and method are needed to provide a consistent response strategy across all types of response systems.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] One embodiment of the technology disclosed herein provides an overall, or holistic view, of an enterprise's interaction with its customers. These embodiments can also provide a holistic view of other types of interactions. In one particular embodiment,

a system collects and aggregates information related to user inquiries and/or responses generated by different types of response systems. Such an embodiment could collect data about phone response system activities and aggregate that information with data about an automated response system activities. Other embodiments collect and aggregate information related to customer information, contact resolutions and other information. Other embodiments of the disclosed technology generate reports based on aggregated information and/or generate recommendations to address problems with the individual response systems or the overall strategy for responding to customer inquiries.

[0008] These and other embodiments are more fully described in the Detailed Description section. It is to be understood, however, that there is no intention to limit the invention to the forms described in this Summary of the Invention or in the Detailed Description. One skilled in the art can recognize that there are numerous modifications, equivalents and alternative constructions that fall within the spirit and scope of the invention as expressed in the claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Various objects and advantages and a more complete understanding of the present invention are apparent and more readily appreciated by reference to the following Detailed Description and to the appended claims when taken in conjunction with the accompanying Drawings wherein:

FIGURE 1 is a block diagram of a system for responding to and analyzing customer inquiries;

FIGURE 2 is a block diagram of another system for responding to and analyzing customer inquiries;

FIGURE 3 is a flowchart of one method for collecting customer inquiry information from different response systems;

FIGURE 4 is a flowchart of one method for analyzing customer inquiry information;

FIGURE 5 is a chart illustrating one method for presenting information about customer inquiries;

FIGURE 6 is a flowchart of one method for generating an overlaid contact center graph; and

FIGURE 7 is another chart illustrating a method for presenting information about customer inquiries.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0010] Referring now to the drawings, where like or similar elements are designated with identical reference numerals throughout the several views, and referring in particular to FIGURE 1, it illustrates a block diagram of a system 100 for responding to and analyzing customer inquiries. It should be noted, that “customer” can refer to any user or system and is not limited to a party making a commercial transaction. This embodiment of the invention includes a response center 105 coupled to a plain old telephone switch (POTS) 110 and to a network 115 such as the Internet. Through these two networks, customers 120 can communicate with the response center 105.

[0011] This version of the response center 105 includes several individual response systems: phone 125, chat 130, email 135, automated agent 140, and interactive voice response (IVR) 145. The response center 105 could also include other systems for communicating with customers or could include fewer response systems than illustrated.

[0012] Each response system can retrieve a recommended response to a customer inquiry from the global knowledge database 150, which can include decision trees and/or logic for compiling responses to customer inquiries. The decision trees/logic can be used by all types of response systems. If necessary, a response system can also retrieve customer data from the customer information database 155 or other data from a third party database (not shown) to generate its responses. For example, when the customer 120 sends an email requesting information on how to cancel an order, a live customer agent at the email response center can search the global knowledge database 150 for the proper response. The agent can then include that response, or at least some portion of the response, in the email to the customer 120. If the same request for information originated by phone, the phone agent could pull the same response, or a similar response template, from the global knowledge database 150 and use it as a transcript for talking with the customer 120. Thus, the same customer inquiry can be answered generally in the same way regardless of the customer's method of communicating the inquiry.

[0013] Response information included in the global knowledge database 150 can be categorized and/or coded to aid in retrieval and identification of proper responses and in record accumulation. The order cancellation response, for example, could be coded as

response number “29.” Each of the response systems, regardless of type, can generate an order cancellation response based on response number “29.” Further, when any response system generates an order cancellation response, the response system can provide the proper code, “29,” to the analysis engine or analysis database 160.

[0014] When a response system provides a response to a customer 120, it also stores an indication of the generating response system in the analysis database 160. For example, when the automated agent 140 generates an order cancellation response, it can store a “29” in the analysis database 160 along with an identifier for the automated agent. Other data can also be stored in the analysis database 160, including time stamps, network statistics, user data, etc.

[0015] In one embodiment, the analysis engine 165 can retrieve data from the analysis database 160 and report on the activities of the various response systems. One embodiment of such a report is shown in Figure 5, which is described in detail below. Typical reports illustrate the number or percentage of responses generated by each individual response system for each response or response category. For example, a report could indicate that two number “29” responses were generated by the response center 105 and that one of those two responses was generated by the automated agent system 140 and the other by the phone response system 125.

[0016] Referring now to Figure 2, it is a block diagram of another system 170 for responding to and analyzing customer inquiries. This embodiment is similar to the

embodiment shown in Figure 1 except that it includes distributed response systems that are not necessarily integrated. Even if not integrated, each response center can draw its responses or template for responses from the global knowledge database 150 and store indications of generated response and the generating response systems in the analysis database 160.

[0017] Referring now to Figure 3, it is a flowchart of one method for collecting customer inquiry information from different response systems. In this embodiment, a response system initially receives a customer inquiry. (Block 175.) The customer can originate the inquiry through a phone call, an email, a link activation, etc. Once the inquiry has been received, the response system determines the proper response and provides it to the customer. (Blocks 180 and 185.) If the response system is staffed with live agents, the live agents are generally responsible for determining the proper response using, for example, a decision tree or template included in the global knowledge database. If the response system is an automated response system, such as a virtual agent or IVR system, the computer is responsible for using the global knowledge database to respond to the user inquiry. Manual intervention is not generally necessary.

[0018] For each response to a customer inquiry, the response identifier is determined and stored in, for example, the analysis database. (Blocks 190 and 195.) An indication of the response system that generated the response can also be stored with the response identifier. In some embodiments, the indication can be as simple as increasing a counter associated with both the response and response system.

[0019] Referring now to Figure 4, it is a flowchart of one method for analyzing customer inquiry information. As described with relation to Figure 3, categorization information related to a generated response is received and stored in a database, typically the analysis database. (Blocks 200 and 205.) This information, as previously described, includes both the response identifier and an indication of the response system. Other information related to the response can also be collected. For example, customer identifiers, customer activities, type of customer, time of day, and lapsed time for generating the response can be collected. This information can be aggregated together or used alone to evaluate the performance of a particular response system or the overall response center. (Blocks 210 and 215.) In yet another embodiment, data related to the customer inquiries can be stored and used to evaluate performance.

[0020] Referring now to Figure 5, it is a chart 220 illustrating one method for presenting information about customer inquiries and responses. This chart includes three overlaid pie charts. The inner chart illustrates a broad category of customer responses. The middle chart illustrates a subcategory of the customer responses shown in the inner chart, and the outer chart indicates the response system used to generate the customer responses corresponding to the middle chart. For example, the inner chart includes a category of customer responses entitled "order status." The "order status" category includes two subcategories: "modify" and "shipping information." The outer chart illustrates which response systems generated responses for those subcategories and how many responses were generated by each. For example, this chart illustrates that for the "shipping information" subcategory, the email and phone response systems generated responses and

that the email response system generated about twice as many responses as did the phone system.

[0021] Using this type of overlaid graph, an analyst can determine what type of issues customers are raising and how those issues are being resolved. In particular, an analyst can determine if particular categories of questions arise often or if a particular category of questions is resolved too often by expensive means such as the phone response system.

[0022] Each portion of the overlaid graph can link to other graphs or additional information. For example, if an analyst selected the “order status” category in the inner chart, then a new graph could be displayed showing more detail. A typical graph is shown in Figure 7. Additionally, selecting a category could cause hyperlinks, flat files, costs, images, or tables to be displayed. In other embodiments, the “email” area for a particular subcategory can be linked to additional data such as receipt time, average response time, repeat users, etc.

[0023] Referring now to Figure 6, it is a flowchart of one method for generating an overlaid contact center graph. This method involves identifying categories and subcategories of customer contacts. (Blocks 225 and 230.) In some embodiments, multiple levels of subcategories can be identified and incorporated into the graph. The graphs in Figures 5 and 7, however, only show one level. Other levels would be illustrated by additional rings in the graphs.

[0024] The analysis engine, or some other logic system, can retrieve information from each response system relating to the number of responses provided for each category and/or subcategory. (Block 235.) For example, the analysis engine can collect all data related to responses in the category “order status,” subcategory “modify,” and further subcategory “vendor 1.” (Shown in Figure 7.) The analysis engine could also retrieve information relating to which response system, phone or email for example, generated the responses. Using the retrieved data, the analysis engine can generate an overlaid contact center graph. (Block 240.)

[0025] The overlaid graph and/or the underlying data can be used to generate recommendations to improve the response center or individual response systems. (Block 245.) Three typical recommendations include: change a business process, enhance the handling of a customer contact, and automate the response to the customer. Notably, one embodiment of the present invention provides an iterative method for improving a response center. For example, if the reports indicate that a particular inquiry is being too often handled by email, the automated agent could be modified to better handle that category of inquiry, hopefully reducing overall costs.

[0026] In conclusion, the present invention provides, among other things, a system and method for improving response centers. Those skilled in the art can readily recognize that numerous variations and substitutions may be made in the invention, its use and its configuration to achieve substantially the same results as achieved by the embodiments described herein. Accordingly, there is no intention to limit the invention to the disclosed

exemplary forms. Many variations, modifications and alternative constructions fall within the scope and spirit of the disclosed invention as expressed in the claims.